

**BODYTALK
WITH
MICHAEL VAN STRATEN
ON**

CLASSIC GOLD DIGITAL

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**ARE YOU ALLERGIC TO SUMMER?
ASTHMA IN ADULTS AND CHILDREN
AND OTHER RESPIRATORY PROBLEMS**

Like hay fever asthma can be aggravated by the changing conditions of the seasons. Whether it's winter coughs and colds that lead to chest infections and a worsening of the asthma, the photochemical smog of hot weather that inflames and sensitises the lungs or the changing barometric pressure and electrical disturbances of thunderstorms, asthma – like kissing – is only out of season when the gorse is not in flower. (And for the non-country folk gorse is never not in flower.) Here you'll find general information about asthma, summer allergies, and a specific section on junk food and wheezy kids.

Symptoms Tight chest, short gasping breaths, wheezing, unproductive cough, postural changes, anxiety.

Eat more fruits, vegetables, salads, especially carrots, mangoes, yellow and red peppers for beta-carotenes and protective antioxidants; grapes, melon, tomatoes, peppers, kiwi fruits for vitamin C; wholegrain cereals and dark leafy greens for B vitamins. Eat plenty of watercress which contains natural chemicals that are specifically lung-protective.

Eat less dairy products, yeast extracts, shellfish, fizzy drinks, nuts and seeds, salt.

Avoid Food allergies are common in asthmatic children so avoid any known allergens, most likely to be food additives – colourings, flavourings and preservatives – shellfish, caffeine in colas, tea, coffee, chocolate; some children may even be allergic to naturally occurring substances in fruits and vegetables. Adults are also often allergic to chemicals used in beer and wine making. Alcohol consumption should be limited and confined to naturally produced wines and beers without the chemical additives.

NB: Aspirin and all related drugs like non-steroidal anti-inflammatories (Nurofen etc) may trigger severe asthmatic reactions, so avoid them unless specifically prescribed by a doctor who knows you have asthma.

The increase in asthma over the last 40 years has been dramatic. Although partly this can be attributed to better diagnosis, it is mostly due to the ever increasing pollution of the air we breathe, a significant rise in the consumption of foods laced with chemicals, and domestic

changes which encourage the number of dust mites in our homes. In the US around 3% of the total population suffer this illness. Although people of all ages get asthma, most sufferers are children – twice as many boys as girls.

In childhood, asthma is almost always an allergy and there is usually a family history of allergic conditions. Hay fever and eczema may be present in close relatives and may also develop in the asthmatic child.

Some children may show extreme reactions to many of the artificial food colours, flavours, preservatives or other additives, especially monosodium glutamate, tartrazine, sulphur dioxide, nitrites and salt. Fish, dairy foods, yeast, nuts, wheat and fizzy drinks may be an important factor for many children.

Adult-onset asthma is not normally an allergic response to environmental factors, but is triggered by changes in the body – which is why it's called intrinsic asthma. It's sometimes brought on by upper respiratory infections, colds or a bout of bronchitis. Only 1 in 15 intrinsic asthma sufferers is likely to get hay fever, whereas more than half of allergic, or extrinsic asthma sufferers will have this problem.

Apart from exposure to allergens, including occupationally encountered substances, there are a number of things which may bring on an attack:

- * emotional stress or anxiety,
- * sudden vigorous exercise,
- * chest infections,
- * sudden changes in breathing patterns, e.g. laughing or coughing,
- * irritants – smoke, paint, chemicals, gasses,
- * sudden changes in temperature.

During the winter, there is more chance of catching a cough or cold, both of which can make asthma much worse due to secondary chest infections. Make sure you boost your natural resistance by healthy eating, take an Ester-C vitamin and zinc supplement and a daily dose of friendly bacteria from low fat natural live yoghurt and Yakult.

There is now a mass of evidence that air pollution is a key factor in the cause of asthma. Industrial pollution is important, but the most serious villain is the internal combustion engine – petrol or diesel. Emission control and lead free petrol have made some difference but not to the sulphur particulates from dirty diesel engines or the nitrogen dioxide. If you are asthmatic, wear a mask when you go out, or at the very least, cover your mouth and nose with a silk scarf. This will filter out some of the irritant particles, and also warm up the cold winter air before it reaches the sensitive lining of your lungs. These can also be severely irritated by ozone which is a major pollutant in modern offices. It's generated by many kinds of electronic gadgetry, specially computers, printers, fax machines and photocopiers. Whilst ozone doesn't cause asthma it irritates and sensitises the linings of the lungs and makes them more easily affected by other irritants.

There are a number of practical changes which it is vital to implement:

- * **Turn off central heating** in the bedroom. It creates air currents that waft the dust mite droppings, which are microscopic, into the air. They are then inhaled by the sleeping occupant.
- * **Ventilate your home or office** to prevent the formation of mould and avoid carpets, particularly in kitchens and bathrooms. These trap moisture, encourage moulds which give of

highly irritant spores.

- * **Most modern offices are drier than the Sahara Desert** which also leaves your mucus membranes highly sensitive. Use a desk top humidifier or surround your work station with green plants, the best of which are ivies and spider plants. These both absorb pollutants and give off a little moisture. Have plenty of green plants at home too.
- * **Don't smoke** if you are asthmatic, or allow smoking anywhere in a house where any member of the family has asthma.
- * **Avoid furry or hairy pets and cage birds.**
- * **Use smooth, wipeable surfaces** in the bedroom. Lino or wood flooring, window blinds, a mite-proof or anti-mite impregnated cover on the mattress, duvet and pillows, damp dust all surfaces just before bed, vacuum daily with a suction cleaner with a medical filter and include the mattress.
- * **Encourage children** to take up any of the wind instruments, this will help establish good breath control.
- * **Always take your medication as prescribed by your doctor. Much of it will be for prevention rather than relief of the symptoms and it can be harmful to stop some of the cortisone drugs suddenly.**

A diet diary is the next step, write down every single thing that you put into your mouth. Note when you get an attack and see if there is a pattern which is repeated. A recent caller to my radio phone-in programme said that after keeping his diary for three weeks, he noticed that an attack always followed eating a yeast extract. He cut out the offending food and hasn't had one since.

Try to reduce the amount of dairy foods in the diet, avoid sugar and salt, eat more fresh fruit and vegetables and lots of garlic and onions. Cheap red wine and acidic white wines may make things worse, so avoid them. In any case, large quantities of alcohol are not a good idea.

Whilst no serious complementary practitioner would claim to be able to cure asthma, some of their treatments can make a dramatic change to the course of the disease. Osteopathy or chiropractic should be the first choice, as this can be of exceptional value to asthma sufferers. Children with the problem are liable to develop curvatures of the spine and pigeon chest as a result of years of breathing difficulties. Manipulative treatment can improve the movement of the ribs and spine, as well as helping to minimise posture changes. Good breathing exercises are vital to make maximum use of all the available air in the lungs.

As well as the Ester-C and zinc supplement mentioned above, one of the most valuable natural remedies is a regular dose of essential fatty acids which have powerful anti-inflammatory effect and can not only reduce the severity of asthmatic reactions but also help by relieving the symptoms of eczema and hay fever. Best of all is MorEPA* or MorEPA Mini* for children as they are the purest and highest dose capsules. For vegetarians or anyone with fish allergies you can substitute Barlean's Organic Flax Seed Oil* used in cooking, salad dressings or taken as a supplement. Stirring a couple of dessertspoons of Barlean's Organic Fortiflax* to porridge, yoghurt, fruit juice or sprinkling on sweet or savoury dishes is extremely effective.

Remember the healing power of touch. Gentle massage to the back will be very soothing to

anyone in the middle of an asthma episode, particularly children.

Tragically, the death toll from asthma is rising – over 2,000 a year in Britain – and many of the fatalities occur in older asthmatics who did not receive adequate treatment when they were younger, or who had ignored the warning signs of their condition worsening.

Asthma is a serious disease, sometimes fatal. Never underestimate the potential consequences of an asthma attack and if you're in the slightest doubt, **call your doctor**.

*Available from selected supermarkets, health stores or direct from www.healthyandessential.com. Tel 08700 53 6000

Bed sheets for asthma

Dust mite droppings are a powerful allergen, and often the trigger of asthma attacks. Effective netting covers called Astex, are impregnated with a non toxic naturally derived insecticide which kills the mites. They come in single, double, king and emperor size. Simply put the net over the surface of the mattress, leave it for eight weeks, take it off and vacuum the mattress to remove the dead dust mites, put back the netting where it will continue to do it's job for around two years. Nets are also available for duvets and for pillows. For detailed information or leaflets contact Protec Health International Limited, 5 Priory Court, Poulton, Cirencester, GL7 5JB, tel: Freephone 0800 838098. www.acpsolutions.co.uk

ARE YOU ALLERGIC TO SUMMER?

It's everybody's dream – you wake to the clear blue sky of a summer dawn, the birds are singing, the bees buzzing, the mercury climbing. Thoughts of a long hot day, a picnic in the country, and a barbecue in the honeysuckle-scented evening, spur you into action. Or do they?

Not if you are one of the unfortunate 20 percent of people who suffer from hay fever or asthma, nor if you are amongst the multitude who endure nettle rash, bad reactions to insect bites and stings, sensitivity to sunlight, or any of the allergies which are so prevalent at this time of year.

If you are amongst the 40 percent of the population who show a susceptibility to allergy, don't lose heart! There may not be a guaranteed cure for your allergy, but there is a great deal of self-help which can ease your misery, alleviate the worst of the symptoms and let you join in most of the summer fun without spending your days in a darkened room with a crate of kleenex.

All allergies are inappropriate responses by the body's immune system to a substance which is not normally harmful. The immune system is a complex mechanism which helps us combat infections. It does this by identifying 'foreign bodies' and then mobilising the white cells to destroy them. In some people, the system makes mistakes and wrongly identifies an innocent substance as an invader. The white cells over-react, producing large quantities of the chemical, histamine, and the symptoms of asthma, hay fever, eczema and all the other allergies which plague so many people.

Hay fever is strictly speaking an allergy to grass pollens but pollen from the now common and widespread commercial crops of oilseed rape and linseed are also frequent irritants, and many people may also have violent reactions to a variety of tree and weed pollens. There are

many over the counter antihistamine remedies available but though they are helpful, even the supposedly non-drowsy versions don't suit everyone. The steroid-based nasal sprays can also be very effective but because of their potential side effects are not ideal for long term use.

These practical steps will help:

Don't go out early morning or late evening when pollen counts are highest.

Keep windows closed in house and car.

If your car isn't air conditioned fit an extra fine filter to the heater system.

Don't mow the lawn – if you have to keep it very short to stop flowering.

Wear wrap round sunglasses to keep pollen out of the eyes.

Sniff cold water to rinse out pollen grains and stop sneezing.

Rinse eyes to remove pollen from lashes.

Shower and wash hair as soon as you come home.

A damp cold used camomile teabag placed over each eye relieves irritation and herbal tea made from three teaspoons of dried camomile flowers, two teaspoons dried stinging nettles, one teaspoon dried St. John's Wort added to one and a half pints boiling water may help reduce your symptoms. Leave the mixture to stand covered for ten minutes, strain and keep in the fridge. Drink a wineglass full morning and evening. The homoeopathic remedy New Era Combination H is also helpful and the traditional treatment of using locally produced honey – a teaspoon before meals and one at bedtime – is certainly worth trying.

Summertime air pollution is another major hazard as the increased ozone level sensitises the mucous membranes of the eyes, nose and lungs which are then triggered into allergic reactions by the tiny particulates of carbon that are particularly prevalent in diesel exhaust. The same mechanism causes a dramatic increase in allergic conditions in those working in sealed air conditioned offices. All the electronic machinery emits ozone and the dust produced by fax machines, laser printers and photocopiers also contains carbon particulates. The solution in the office is lots of green plants, air filters and humidifiers, but if you're a serious sufferer the only solution is to wear a mask if you have to go out.

If hay fever ruins every summer holiday then opt for mountain walking above the tree line in the Alps or a sightseeing tour of Iceland – there won't be much pollen in either place.

Summer sun can also be a problem and though everyone understands about the risks of too much sun and skin cancer, few people realise that allergic skin reactions and other rashes can be caused by sunlight.

Polymorphic light eruption is an allergic reaction to ultra violet rays. It's often blamed on an allergy to sun screen lotions so you stop using your factor 20 and the rash gets worse. It's more likely if you've got fair skin but the answer is to use more protection and keep the affected area – often the front of the chest or upper arms – covered up and out of the sun. PLE can erupt within seconds or after a few hours and causes severe itching. Using a combination of antihistamine and old fashioned calamine lotion – Caladryl – leaves your skin a bit pink and chalky but is extremely effective. PLE is a very poorly understood problem and we still don't know the exact mechanism. Antihistamine tablets like Piriton or Clarityn may help, but antihistamine creams can make it worse.

Photoallergic dermatitis occurs when the sun reacts with chemicals in perfumes, soaps, cosmetics, drugs applied to the skin or even sun screen lotions. Anyone with sensitive skin should not go to the beach on a cloud of Chanel or Estee Lauder, made up to the nines or

with any form of medicated lotion, cream or ointment. At the first sign of this type of rash, get out of the sun, take antihistamines, shower thoroughly and apply Caladryl.

Prickly heat is not an allergy but an uncomfortable rash which happens in hot humid weather when sweat ducts become blocked allowing the irritant sweat to leak out just under the skin. Use baby wipes or similar to cleanse the area and remove bacteria which will thrive in hot humid sweaty conditions. Wash or shower frequently and dust with a light film of tea tree talcum powder which is both soothing and prevents infection.

Excessive sweating and heat exhaustion are common problems especially if you are travelling to hot humid areas. In this situation, drinking large amounts of water throughout the day is a vital key to avoiding dehydration. The Rain forest Indians of Brazil overcome the energy draining effects of combined heat and very high humidity by using their native plant guarana. This is available as tablets, liquid or even as Buzzgum. Fungal infections can be a major problem with these conditions, so wash or clean with wet wipes under the arms, breasts, and groin two or three times a day then apply a light dusting of tea tree powder.

Drug induced photosensitivity is a major summer problem to which very little attention is paid and can be an important reason for taking extra special care in the sunshine. A number of commonly prescribed and over the counter medicines can create allergy or sensitivity to sunlight. This doesn't mean you have to go into purdah if you take an aspirin for your hangover, but forewarned is forearmed and though only a small percentage of people will suffer from this problem it's worth checking with your GP, or preferably your pharmacist who'll probably know more, before jetting off to the sunshine. Non-steroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAIDs) widely used for rheumatism and arthritis, some antibiotics, drugs for blood pressure, depression, diabetes, heart disease and epilepsy can all be a problem. Essential oils especially bergamot, lavender and sandalwood can also trigger these reactions.

Mostly the drug induced reactions are fairly minor and could be avoided by taking medication at night instead of during the day, using a higher factor sunscreen, or simply avoiding the sunlight. Creams like Anthisan or Lactocalamine will soothe these rashes quickly.

Finally, watch out for the wasps and bees. If you do get stung, mixing a little salt and vinegar to a paste will instantly soothe a wasp sting, if it's a bee remove the sting with tweezers and bathe with a teaspoon of bicarbonate of soda in half a glass of water. Proprietary products like Wasp Eze are always handy to have in your travel bag. Wherever you're going midges, mosquitoes and other biting insects can ruin a holiday and if malaria is prevalent at your destination, one mosquito bite can be fatal. Taking anti-malarial drugs is not enough, you must avoid getting bitten. There's little evidence that eating garlic, burning aromatherapy candles or spraying lemon oil everywhere will repel anything apart from your partner. The good news though is that a new insect repellent which is natural and does not contain the foul smelling DEET – also toxic – is now available. Called Mosi-Guard and properly tested it's an effective insect repellent which should keep you bite and sting free.

This may sound like a catalogue of horrors but in spite of all the possible problems, summertime is wonderful everywhere, but nowhere better than on a glorious English summer evening with a glass of Pimms and a picnic.

JUNK FOOD MEANS WHEEZY CHILDREN

It's a certain fact that poor diet equals poor health but the latest research shows there may be a specific link between junk food and the spiralling numbers of children suffering from asthma.

Professor Anthony Seaton and his team from Scotland studied two groups of children in Saudi Arabia. One group living in rural villages on the traditional diet which included vegetables, cereals, fruit and milk products, the other more affluent group living in towns eating the typical western junk food diet. The youngsters on the poor diet were more likely to have asthma than those eating traditional healthy food. "A significantly greater prevalence of allergic symptoms was found in urban than in rural children" say the researchers.

Though Saudi Arabia may be a long way from the UK, this study has a lesson we should all learn. Childhood asthma is reaching epidemic proportions throughout Great Britain and it appears to be even worse in rural East Anglia and the Scottish Highlands than in our city centres. So atmospheric pollution is not the whole story.

Today one in seven children between the ages of two and fifteen are suffering with this condition, which means one and a half million youngsters who may be missing school, not being physically active and not enjoying a full social life. In fact over a third of asthmatic children lose at least one whole week from school, while nearly 10 percent miss more than a month. Almost half lose out on some PE periods and a third have to stay indoors at play time.

As a Naturopath I've always known that good nutrition was the key to good health. Obviously, with asthma and other allergies there are genetic and environmental factors which play a big role, but without all the nutrients that build a strong immune system, the body's defences are weakened and allergic reactions much more likely. A few weeks ago I spoke to one of the country's leading allergy specialists, Professor Jonathan Brostoff (correct spellings), who said "Lack of the protective substances in fresh fruit and vegetables and a generally poor diet is an important issue in allergic illness. If the poor diet includes many foods with artificial additives the problem becomes even worse."

In spite of their best intentions few parents manage to get their children to eat decent food, so it's hardly surprising that a recent study by the Medical Research Council revealed the horrifying truth about the way kids eat today. The report examines the difference between the food eaten by four-year-olds in 1950 with that in the 1990s. To everyone's apparent amazement - but certainly not mine - mums knew more about healthy eating 40 years ago than they do today.

What I find almost beyond belief is that anyone is surprised by these findings. I'm constantly faced in my consulting room with both children and adults whose eating habits are a certain guarantee of poor health now and worse health later. The massive growth of supermarkets, convenience foods, the fast food industry, the multi-billion pound advertising budgets for junk foods, social changes, government alterations in education and school meals policies are all part of the reason.

It may seem as if we've never had it so easy: supermarkets offer us appealing packages 24 hours a day; food manufacturers bombard adults and children with a stream of advertising persuading us that their latest offering is delicious, nutritious and better than anything made at home. Products like synthetic drinks, sugar-covered cereals, sweetened desserts and savoury snacks laden with salt and fat are all marketed directly at children.

It's not just that many of these goods are poor nutritional value for money, but filling a child's stomach with them displaces the far healthier foods like good bread, pasta, rice, traditional

cereals like porridge, eggs, meat, fruit and vegetables, which could all protect them against asthma.

Being a bit dirty could also be an important way of encouraging better immunity from allergic illnesses. Parents have become paranoid about exposing their children to health risks and physical danger. They sanitise their homes from top to bottom, and never let their children play in the dirt. This unhealthy obsession with cleanliness limits the exposure that children get to the common bacteria which help build strong and protective immunity.

Foods that fight asthma

If your child is asthmatic there are many foods which will fight asthma and help to reduce the frequency and severity of attacks. But even if there is no asthma in your family these are the same foods which will help reduce the likelihood of your child developing the illness. These very same foods are also highly protective against many other diseases including skin, eye and heart problems, and some forms of cancer. Of course there is nothing wrong with the occasional frozen TV dinner, takeaway burger and chips or junk food treat that all youngsters seem to love. The reality is that it's more the omission of the protective foods than the consumption of junk foods that causes the problem.

If you have an asthmatic child you need to take care of the practical details too like minimising exposure to the house dust mite and its droppings, which means protective coverings on the bed, getting rid of carpets and curtains, cuddly toys and other dust traps, as well as considering any problems caused by poor ventilation, overheated bedrooms or pets. But whatever else you do, encourage your child to eat as wide a selection of the following foods as possible.

Fruits, vegetables and salads for beta-carotenes and protective antioxidants – introduce purees of carrots, pumpkin, swede, sweet potato as early as possible to your baby, for the lung and immune protective beta-carotene. Follow with broccoli, brussel sprouts, cabbage (a baby that eats brussels by seven months will eat anything in later life), all the cabbage family contain phytochemicals (protective plant substances, especially glucosinolates which have specific benefits to lung tissue. For older children include watercress which contains specific lung protecting chemicals.

Grapes, melon, tomatoes, peppers, kiwi fruits for vitamin C, lycopene – a powerful antioxidant that protects body cells.

Wholegrain cereals for B vitamins and essential fibre.

Apples and pears for more fibre that's easily digestible, vitamin C and potassium.

Berries – all children love these and the more they eat the better – blackberries, blueberries, raspberries and strawberries are excellent sources of vitamin C and they're also rich in anti-bacterial chemicals which help prevent chest infections.

Tropical fruits like pineapples, mangoes and paw paws are all rich in healing and protective enzymes.

Avocados, nuts and seeds (for the over fives only), extra virgin olive oil for the super antioxidant vitamin E.

Oily fish – salmon, sardines, tuna, herring, mackerel – for essential fatty acids.

Chicken, eggs and modest amounts of red meat for protein, iron and more B vitamins.

Wherever possible try to make sure these are organic as that's your only guarantee of avoiding unwanted antibiotics which can lower a child's natural resistance and lead to recurrent chest infections.

Cow's milk and other dairy products, full fat for the under fives, are essential for vitamin D and calcium. If your child is asthmatic or there is a strong history of asthma in the family, it's probably best to use goat's or sheep's milk.

It may sound ludicrously simple but I've followed this plan in my practice for many years with extremely good results. Happily the serious research scientists are now taking much more interest in the links between asthma and diet and hopefully it won't be long before children are given good nutritional advice rather than pills and puffers. It's hardly surprising that with our children's diet being the worst in Europe, we have the highest percentage of asthmatic children, whereas the lowest incidence of asthma is in eastern Europe, Indonesia, Greece, China, Taiwan and India where people are mostly poor and live on traditional simple and healthy diets.

Here in the UK the number of youngsters wheezing their way through life has doubled in ten years – if changing their diet can make a difference, shouldn't every parent do it now – reducing the amount of asthma would be great and the other long term health benefits of better nutrition would be enormous.

Case History - Carly

Some years ago I saw Carly, then 14, who was having serious problems with her asthma. "It was horrible. I slipped back in lots of the work that went for my SATS. I lost contact with my friends because they just forgot to call me at weekends. And some of the people at school used to bully me because they said I was skiving."

The first thing I did was change Carly's typical teenage diet. Fried, battered sausages and chips have given way to cheese and tomato pizza, chocolate cake and Mars bars have been replaced by high-fibre, low-sugar fruit bars and the crisps are always reduced-fat. Her old diet was seriously bad, with masses of high-fat and high-sugar foods, all short of healthy nutrients.

Carly's asthma improved dramatically, "I now eat lots of vegetables at home - particularly cauliflower, carrots and peas, which I love. I normally have Ricles instead of the Frosties I had before - and always with semi-skimmed milk. When I do have crisps or drinks, they're always the reduced-fat or diet type. I don't like fruit much until the peaches and other soft things come in summer, but I do eat a kiwi fruit every morning now. It's worth making this effort because I don't want to go back to being ill again - and I'm already getting comments on how much better I look."

Carly's original diet was typical for most teenagers, but she had the added problem of her asthma. She was missing out on all the protective nutrients that boost natural resistance, vitamins A, C, E, selenium, iron, magnesium and calcium. Her vitamin D consumption was almost non-existent. Not surprisingly she was getting continual coughs and colds, all of which aggravated her asthma.

Now 23 with a good degree and a job in publishing, Carly says, "I've had bad asthma most of my life, so I think a lot about the effect food has on my body. It's not just about my weight and being fat but much more about how food reacts on me. I never ate as much junk food as my friends as I needed lots of health-giving vitamins and minerals – there aren't many of those in the rubbish most teenagers eat today."

